

asemic movement 1

**asemic movement** is a free, electronic journal intended to disseminate asemantic writing & related ideas internationally.

what is asemantic writing?

anything which looks like writing, but in which the person viewing can't read any words, can be described as "asemic writing".

I have an idea that asemantic writing sits on a continuum between abstract images & legible writing.

broadly, asemantic writing is a whole class of visual phenomena. there are at least 3 different ways for asemantic writing to occur:

- \* deliberately made as an illegible form of writing;
- \* writing intended to be legible, but for one reason or another, is not legible;
- \* something which accidentally looks like illegible writing.

many poets, calligraphers from different traditions, visual artists & graphic designers deliberately make asemantic writing.

writing intended to be legible might be illegible because of:

- \* mental or physical distress or carelessness of the person writing;
- \* faulty writing instrument or printer;
- \* decay or other problems of the surface written upon (malfunctioning computer monitor);
- \* the writing system is unknown to the person viewing it (Chinese characters, for a person who hasn't learned to read them);
- \* lighting or other conditions (person attempting to read is too close or too far away) render the writing temporarily illegible.

accidental asemantic writing might be produced by:

- \* abstract art which uses fragments of the marks from which writing is formed;
- \* natural phenomena such as marks on trees, conglomerations of twigs, grass, stones & so on;
- \* traces of anything created by humans using "gestural" movements.

whether something is asemantic writing or not is subjective: if one person can't read a piece of writing, it is asemantic for that person. if another person can read the same piece of writing, it is not asemantic for the second person. so, the quality of being asemantic is not in the writing, but a consequence of whether a particular person can read it at a particular time.

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where no author is specified, the words were written by Tim Gaze

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a note about form: the cluster



Bernard Ionescu, 2007  
(bernard . ionescu @ gmail . com)

rather than the traditional rectangular, well-behaved text format, some examples of asemic writing are more like clusters or clouds.



Jim Leftwich & Tim Gaze  
from **Asemia** (anabasis.xtant, 2003)



Ulfert Wilke  
cover of **Listen**, by Joseph Kerman (Worth, 1972)



## Patricia Bralley: asemic calligraphy & why she does it

(quotes from her blog,

<http://patriciabralley.blogspot.com/2007/05/blue-squares-and-asemic-calligraphy.html>)

*I do not know either kanji (Chinese characters) nor have I studied shodo (Japanese calligraphy). So of course my calligraphic-like swirls are without meaning, that is asemantic or "asemic."*

...

*I executed the "writing" as an exercise in Taoist meditation, the [guided movements](#) I have mention before, only these were movements writ small... so small that it was simply almost writing rather than the grand flow of postures and mudras demonstrated during the practice of guided movements, or spontaneous Qigong.*

*I called my doodling "intuitive calligraphy." I consider it both "guided" by the subtle flow of energy within me, as well as "spontaneous" as it simply is what flows out once the attention settles inward.*

*To me "intuitive calligraphy" is a meditative practice stemming from Taoism. To me it ties into my understanding of [sacred language](#), and memory, and transcending. I think of it as the manual version of speaking in tongues. Then suddenly, I discovered this term "asemic calligraphy."*

(examples of her work from Silence: A Gallery, <http://pbralleysilence.blogspot.com/>)



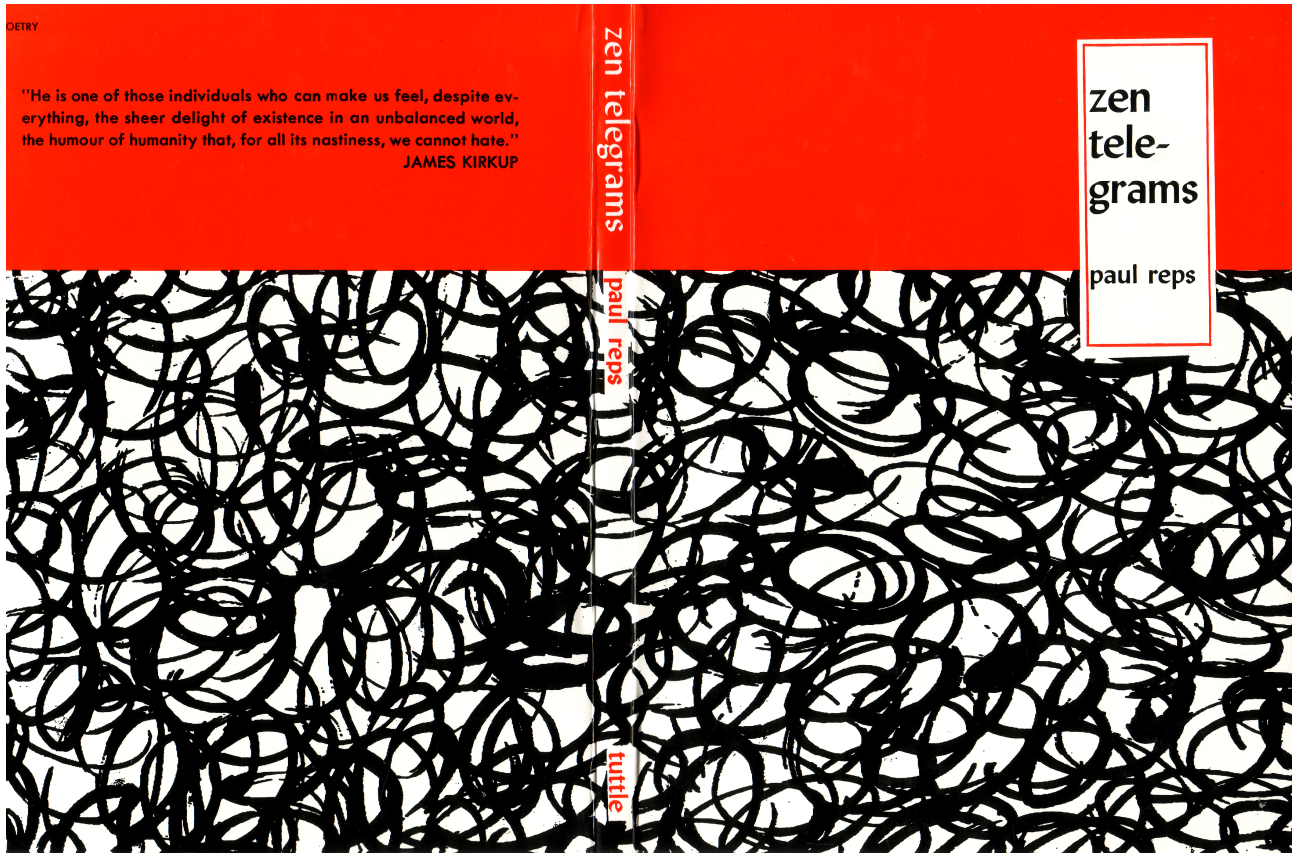
(& a quote from Silence: A Gallery):

*What I was doing was intuitive calligraphy painted directly onto photographs I had printed on watercolor paper. It was "intuitive" as it stemmed from my Taoist practice of "reading energy." I focused upon photo images and then gave expression to their energy via spontaneous Qigong (or guided movements as it's called in my meditation tradition).*

*I called it "calligraphy" because my other inspiration is the Buddhist tradition, spiritual calligraphy.*

Patricia's intention appears to be similar to 2 other Westerners who pursued Asian approaches to spirituality.

Paul Reps, author of **Zen Flesh, Zen Bones**, produced many picture-poems, combinations of image & English words, produced with a calligraphy brush on paper. **zen telegrams** (Charles E Tuttle, 1959) & **GOLD and fish signatures** (Charles E Tuttle, 1969) are 2 published collections. The poems contain simple, direct, easily legible English words. However, the cover of **zen telegrams** is unlike his picture-poems, & could be described as asemic writing:



rather than Japanese brush traditions, it resembles some of the artwork usually described as Abstract Expressionist in English-speaking culture or Art Informel in French-speaking culture.

Barry Stevens' book **Don't Push the River** (Real People Press, 1970) is an account of her time working with the Gestalt Institute of Canada in 1969. A few pages have a single, simple, naïve calligraphic doodle on them. However, most pages are paragraphs of words, with an occasional small doodle between paragraphs.



That is neither gestalt nor Gestalt.

Suppression isn't *any* kind of therapy.

"I feel frustrated in conveying that Gestalt is not *rules*."

This is the hazard: looking for rules and finding them. If you find *rules*, you have not latched onto Gestalt. You haven't latched onto Client-centered therapy, either. Or Jesus or Buddha or John Dewey or Maria Montessori or A. S. Neill. You may learn from the Master, but then you have to dump him and take off on your own. It's sort of like what Szent-Gyorgi wrote to a young man in London who had asked, "How do you do research?" Szent-Gyorgi's reply was, "You do it according to your own personality, if any."

Fritz: "Michelangelo would have been a sculptor even if he had no chisel."

"I only asked if you are aware of what you are doing. I didn't say you shouldn't do it."



A book is odd. Between those two paragraphs, I made gravy. Life is odd, too, in somewhat the same way.



In the mornings, Teddy, Don, and David have the people in small groups, about ten in each. In the evenings, Fritz meets with all of us for two hours or more. He seems to think he should give some lectures. The first one didn't go on very long. The second was even shorter. He said he was having trouble about what to say, that he doesn't like to repeat himself and of course he has said it all before. After that, some people took the hot seat, and he "worked" with them. He is softer, more gentle, while just as keen and just as firm. I didn't detect any bitterness or spite, and there was more compassion. He seems easy-er, all around. "There must be something to my method. I am still learning."



I didn't complete the "no gossiping" part. By *noticing* the no gossiping—what happens—I have noticed many other things too. How

I read her doodles as attempts to record impressions of particular states of mind.

She mentions Zen Buddhism & Native American ways of thinking, as well as Gestalt therapy techniques.

the blurry area between text & image

visual poet Derya Vural, of Turkey, has produced a series of works using bitumen, which could be considered to be asemic writing by some people, & abstract shapes by others.

her style makes me think of *ebru*, the Turkish art of ink marbling on paper.

I'm also reminded of the liquid, smudged shapes of decalcomania.

there's a similarity to inkblot art, as well.



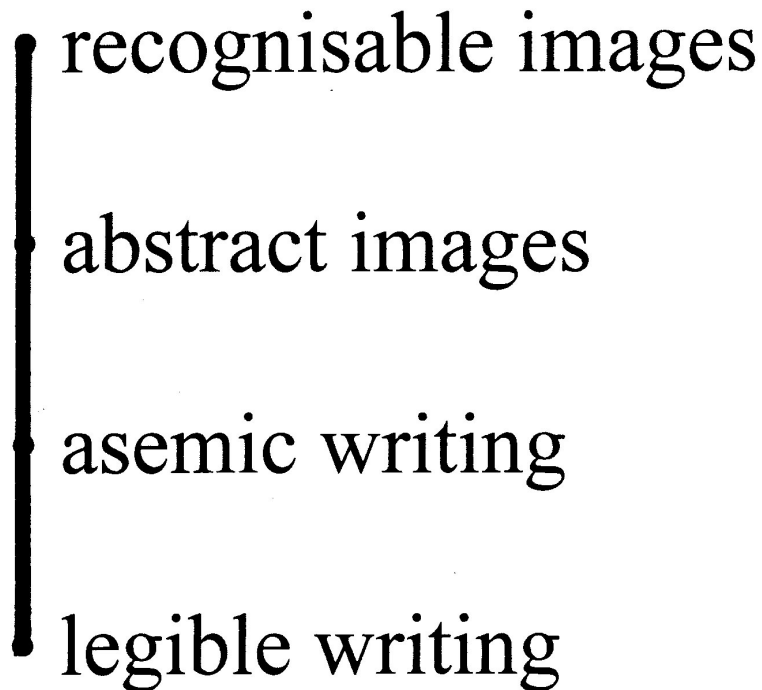






(more can be found at her blog, <http://dryvrl.blogspot.com/>)

## the continuum between text & image



I have been working with the idea that there's a continuum extending from images to text.

Where something sits on this continuum is subjective.

One person sees a picture of a house (recognisable image); another sees a bundle of lines (abstract image). One person can read a piece of graffiti (legible writing); another can't (asemic writing). One person sees an unknown species of writing (asemic writing); another sees spaghetti (abstract image).

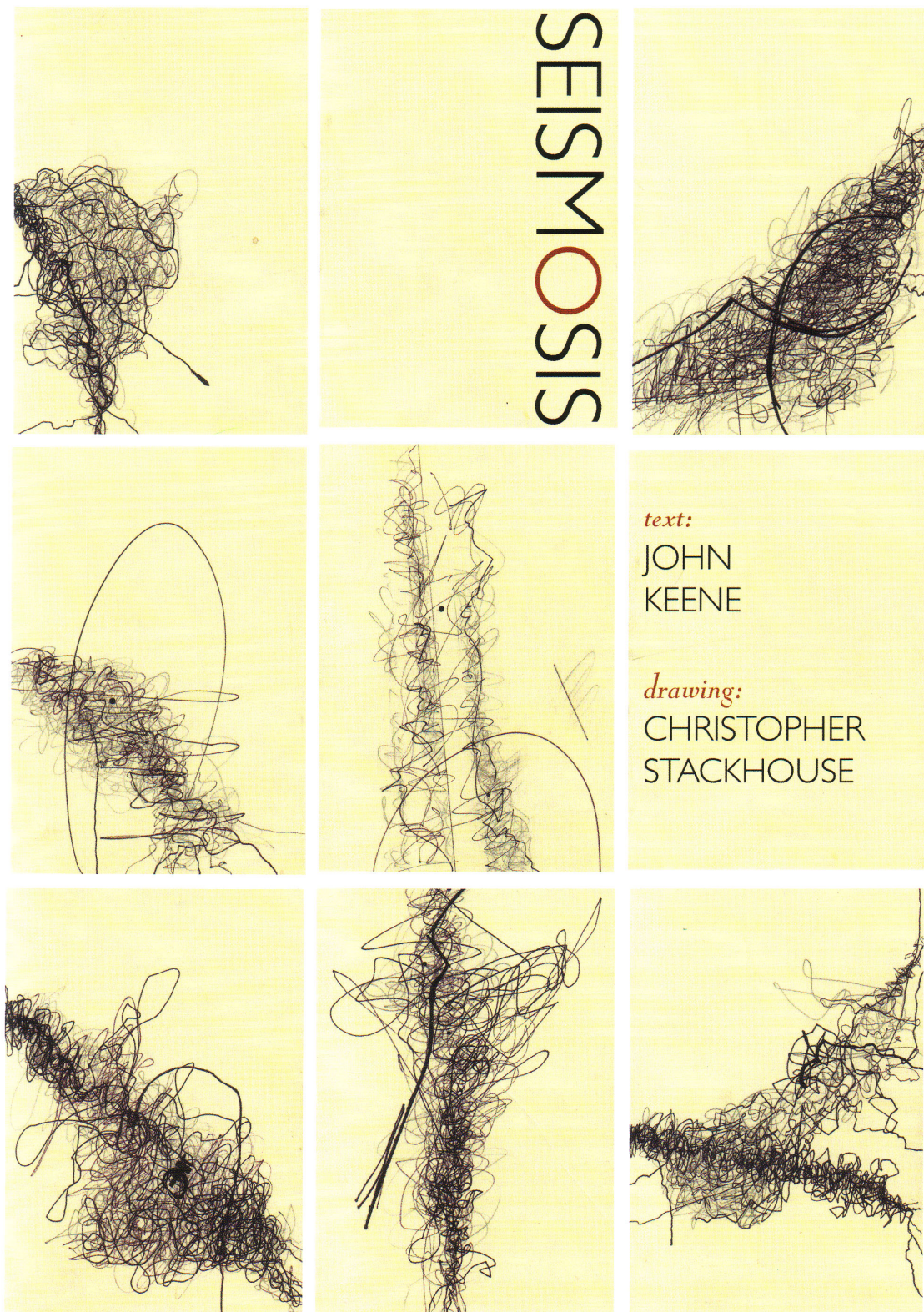
Tim Gaze  
May 2006

previously posted at [textimagepoem blog \(USA\)](#) & [blatt blog \(Czech Republic\)](#);

I sometimes add quotes around the word "spaghetti": the viewer has seen something which looks like spaghetti, not actual spaghetti in a bowl.



book review: **Seismosis**, by John Keene & Christopher Stackhouse



the real cover is more stylish than this garish reproduction, matched by pleasantly off-white paper.



**Seismosis** (1913 Press, 2006) is a collaboration between experimental novelist & poet Keene, & poet & visual artist Stackhouse.

Christopher Stackhouse produces fine-lined drawings which sit either side of asemic writing & abstract image. Christopher passed drawings to John, who responded with attempts to describe his reactions to the drawings with words, usually precise analyses of what the drawings made him think. For example, he draws a connection with the mathematical branch Topology, which deals with spaces.

I'm more attracted to the drawings than I am to the words. Each of Stackhouse's drawings, although they are similar in style, seems to be an attempt to record or capture something specific. A specific idea or vibration seems to be the source of each drawing.

As well as bundles of fine lines which could be called controlled scribbling, most compositions include thicker lines which give an impression of greater force or conviction, & sometimes include solid black areas. These black areas form regular shapes such as rectangles or triangles.

Using the ancient Western notion of the primal elements,

(fire: speed, light, heat, changeability

air: intellect, ideas

water: emotions, gentle flow

earth: physicality, stillness)

Christopher's style feels airy to me: despite the intuitive, unworded nature of his communication, I get a sense of something intellectual going on.

Applying this Western scheme to **Seismosis** is perhaps perilous, given that both of these men are African-American. I'm searching for ways to interpret asemic writing across many different cultures. I'll expand upon my ideas in a future edition of **asemic movement**.

Keene experiments with different typographical arrangements (such as columns of words or free-form poetry), as well as conventional paragraphs. "Poetic prose" is my best description for his words. I'd prefer not to delve into his words in detail.

A foreword by Ed Roberson & an afterword by Geoffrey Jacques explain more about the collaborative creative process which produced the book.

The strongest appeal, for me, is the uniqueness of Christopher's voice. It feels like a personal language, which he has evolved over a number of years, which transcends his ability to explain in words.

Some notes I made a couple of months ago, about his drawings:

centring, a sense of purpose.

describing 3D spaces by means of feeling out or sketching, a bit like physical gesticulations.

many points of focus, thicker lines, completely black areas, highly structured zones, straight lines.

meander.